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LIAISON EVALUATION

BY

STATISTICS DIVISION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Statistics Division conducted an evaluation of Liaison to determine its acceptability and utility to readers. The evaluation included four sources of information: a telephone survey of a random sample drawn from the mailing list; a business reply card inserted in the January, 1986 issue; a content analysis of comments obtained from the survey; and a review of unsolicited letters. These multiple measures allowed the use of relatively small samples. Because the findings were consistent from all four sources of data, results can be viewed with greater confidence than findings from a single source study.

The majority of readers found Liaison useful in addressing a number of their interests and concerns. The selection of material and variety of topics were considered good or very good by almost all the respondents. Over 90 percent of those surveyed by telephone stated that Liaison kept them well informed on criminal justice events. The results of the business reply cards showed varied uses for Liaison. Thirty percent of the readers considered Liaison a valuable data source, while another thirty percent used it in pursuing professional interests. Liaison was also used (24%) in policy and program development and in implementation. A further 16% used it for teaching purposes. The majority of the readers indicated that the contents of the articles helped them gain or maintain awareness of various government and private organizations' activities.

Almost all of those contacted by telephone (99%) rated the overall quality of Liaison as good or very good. Over 90 percent of these respondents considered the writing style, colour, photography, and format to be of good quality. The readers' commments emphasize that the magazine be unchanged in these regards.

The responses of respondents on the issue of cost were slightly different between the card and telephone samples. Nevertheless, these samples provide an indication of the amounts people would pay for Liaison.

Of those who responded, 44% of the card replies were from readers who indicated they would not pay any amount; 36% of those interviewed indicated they also would not pay. A further 21% of those interviewed and 47% of the cards returned indicated that they would be prepared to pay a nominal fee, less than 1 dollar per issue. Although the vast majority of subscribers considered Liaison useful, between 64% (telephone survey) and 95% (card survey) would not pay the cost recovery figure of 15 dollars. This indicates that the introduction of a subscription fee for Liaison would result in a significant loss of readership. Objections to payment should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in the publication. The great majority of those surveyed by telephone (79%) would be somewhat to very concerned if Liaison were discontinued. The fact that 21% stated that they would not be concerned if Liaison were discontinued indicates that approximately 2,000 names could be dropped from the mailing list without a strong negative reaction.

Many readers indicated that the Ministry of the Solicitor General has a responsibility to keep people informed through mechanisms such as Liaison. There appeared to be a widely-held view that Liaison, as a government publication, should be provided free to anyone concerned with criminal justice activities.

An unanticipated finding of the telephone survey was a problem with the Liaison mailing list. A number of respondents never requested, but received, Liaison. In some instances the individual to whom the magazine was being sent had either moved or was no longer at a particular place of work. Some of the current recipients of Liaison had no particular interest in Liaison or criminal justice. In any case it seems that greater efficiency could be achieved by updating and streamlining the mailing list.

Recommendations

Given the results of the survey, consideration should be given to:

- Maintaining current format, layout and general appearance of Liaison

The publication, as it currently stands, is highly rated by the readers. Major deletions or changes to the format and design of Liaison would apparently not be favourably received.

- Continuing to provide Liaison at no cost

One of the objectives of this evaluation was to determine whether or not readers would pay the cost recovery price of 15 dollars for Liaison. The results indicate that approximately three-quarters would not pay this amount. A further one third of the combined sample would not pay any amount for the publication.

- Revising the mailing list

An effort should be undertaken to update and streamline the Liaison mailing list. One might consider, for example, creating an entirely new mailing list by informing subscribers that the list is being revised as an efficiency measure and that they will be included only if they submit a reader reply card. In this way the mailing list could be substantially reduced and mailing and production costs decreased, without alienating or losing readers committed to Liaison. The maintenance of a current mailing list would result in significant savings while maintaining a diverse and substantial readership.

- Increasing the emphasis on local and regional issues of national interest

Increased emphasis on both regional and local issues of national interest would address the concerns of readers who indicated that they would find it useful to have more information on other components of the criminal justice system.

- Providing more references, bibliographies, and fact sheets

Given the frequent use of Liaison in teaching and training exercises and for professional interest, a number of readers said it would be useful to have more fact sheets, bibliographies, and references included as a means of disseminating information to a wider readership and following up on issues of interest.

INTRODUCTION

Liaison is a monthly journal for the criminal justice system, and is published by the Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada. The Statistics Division conducted an evaluation of Liaison to determine its acceptability and utility to readers. The evaluation included four sources of information: a telephone survey of a random sample drawn from the mailing list; a business reply card inserted in the January, 1986 issue; a content analysis of comments obtained from the survey; and a review of unsolicited letters.* Multiple measures allowed the use of relatively small samples. Because the findings from all sources of data were consistent, results can be viewed with greater confidence than findings from a single source study.

Who Reads Liaison

Of those responding with the reply cards, 43% were from an organization, and 57% were individual responses. The telephone survey was conducted on organizations in 73% of the cases and 26% on individuals. Combined, these were roughly representative of the organization/individual distribution of the mailing list.

Do Respondents Read Liaison

The majority of those people who receive Liaison do read it. Of those readers surveyed by telephone, approximately three-quarters read Liaison regularly; either completely or for specific articles of interest. Roughly 27 percent of the sample

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* Methodological issues are discussed in the Appendix.

did not read Liaison. Librarians, who received and circulated Liaison to others, accounted for a large portion of this group. Overall, the readers typically found something of interest in each issue of Liaison.

A fundamental review of the mailing list is required to exclude those readers who expressed no interest in Liaison. A means should be developed to ensure that only those readers interested in receiving Liaison remain on the mailing list. If the onus is placed on the readers to remain on the list, significant reductions could be achieved while still allowing Liaison to maintain a diverse and substantial readership.

Content and Coverage

Overall, Liaison was considered effective in meeting the readers' information needs. The great majority of readers (97%), responding by the reply cards, indicated that Liaison was useful in addressing a number of their personal or professional interests and concerns.

Further, about 95 percent of those surveyed by telephone indicated that Liaison was important for keeping them well-informed on criminal justice events. This was supported in unsolicited letters. For example, Professor G. Kirchoff, from the Federal Republic of Germany, noted in a letter to the editor that Liaison "... keeps me in touch with the most significant developments in the field of Criminal Justice in Canada". Between 70 and 80 percent of the readers surveyed by telephone believed that components of the magazine, such as the People section, the New Publications section, and the Letters to the Editor were either important or very important to the value of Liaison.

Approximately 78% of the telephone sample indicated that Liaison maintained communications between themselves and the criminal justice system.

Liaison has a very diverse readership, and this is reflected in the variety of uses to which it is put. The most frequent uses, as shown by the business reply cards, were: as a data source (31%); for professional interest (31%); and as teaching material (16%). Liaison was also used by some of the readers in policy and program development and implementation. To quote Dr. J. Ciale, University of Ottawa, Department of Criminology, Liaison "... provides information to a large network of professionals at all levels of the Criminal Justice Society".

The role of Liaison in providing information and maintaining contact between its readers and the criminal justice system was considered by over half of the telephone respondents as having been done well. In order to maintain such a role, Liaison has had to span several regions and cover a wide range of issues. Nevertheless, the publication has gone far in assuring that this role is maintained wherever possible.

All of those surveyed by telephone believed the selection of material and variety of topics were good or very good. The open-ended questions revealed a small percentage of respondents who, nevertheless, requested an increased variety in topics and/or depth to the material. Additions to the publication, such as fact sheets, bibliographies and references, were also requested. The majority of the telephone respondents reported that adequate coverage of the Ministry's activities was provided. A small minority, however, noted that there was too

much focus on the Ministry of the Solicitor General. Approximately half of the respondents believed that Liaison adequately presented the activities of other government levels and private/non-profit organizations. Comments from the telephone and reply card samples also indicate that a large minority of readers viewed coverage of local and regional issues as inadequate.

Format

Almost all of the readers, 99% of the telephone survey, rated the quality of Liaison as good to very good. Over 90 percent of this sample considered the articles to be adequately or very well written. Unsolicited comments on the quality of the articles were typically positive. For example, the Honourable R.E. Salhay of the District Court of Ontario wrote: "It is extremely well written, informative and, in my view, very helpful to those involved in the administration of criminal justice". The telephone respondents were asked to rate the layout and appearance of the magazine. On the issues of graphics and photography, 90 percent considered them important. Approximately three-quarters had considered issues of colour and paper quality to be equally important. When alternative formats were offered to these readers, 93 percent preferred that Liaison remain as it is. The random selection of readers' comments from both card and telephone surveys supported the view that the magazine retain its layout and appearance.

Cost Recovery

The questions posed to respondents on the issue of cost were slightly different between the card and telephone samples. Nevertheless, these samples provide an indication of the amounts people would pay for Liaison.

Of those who responded, 44% indicated they would not pay any amount; 36% of those interviewed indicated they also would not pay. A further 21% of those interviewed and 47% of the cards returned indicated that they would be prepared to pay a nominal fee--less than 1 dollar per issue.

Although the vast majority of subscribers considered Liaison useful, between 64% (telephone survey) and 95% (card survey) would not pay the cost recovery figure of 15 dollars. It would appear from the different results on cost between the two samples, that many of those responding by card participated as a means to indicate their opposition to a subscription fee. This would indicate that the introduction of a subscription fee for Liaison would result in a significant loss of readership. Objections to payment should not be interpreted as a lack of interest in the publication. The great majority of those surveyed by telephone (79%) would be somewhat to very concerned if Liaison were discontinued. Many readers indicated that the Ministry of the Solicitor General has a responsibility to keep people informed through mechanisms such as Liaison. There appeared to be a widely-held view that Liaison, as a government publication, should be provided free to anyone concerned with criminal justice activities.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this evaluation indicate that the readers are satisfied with the content and format of Liaison. For the most part, the responses to the publication were positive. The majority of people claimed that Liaison was effective in meeting their information needs. The respondents were also highly positive about the layout and appearance of the publication.

On the issue of the publication's role in providing information and contact between readers and the criminal justice system, the results from the telephone survey were slightly mixed. In more than half of the cases, the publication was seen as fulfilling the readers' communication and information needs. Since the criminal justice system covers a wide geographical area and incorporates many different forms, it is difficult to address all the concerns of all regions and groups. Liaison has, nevertheless, succeeded in satisfying the needs and interests of a diverse readership.

A random number of cards and telephone interview forms were selected and examined on the basis of reader comments and suggestions. Content analysis revealed comments which arose with some degree of regularity. The readers' recommendations included: requests for more variety in the topics and/or more depth to material dealt with, more material directed towards the reader's interests, and more regional information. Other readers suggested that fact sheets, bibliographies and references be included.

In regard to payment for the magazine, 44% of the returned cards and 36% of the telephone surveys indicated that the readers would not pay a fee for Liaison. Most important, between 64% in the telephone survey and 95% in the card survey replied that they would not pay the cost recovery figure of 15 dollars. Imposition of a subscription fee would result in a drastic loss of readers. Other means to reduce the costs of the publication should be explored, while satisfying the readers, maintaining the quality of the material, and still providing Liaison as a free publication. One possible cost-saving measure would be a reduction in the mailing list.

APPENDIX A

PROBLEM AREAS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The evaluation of Liaison did not run as smoothly as expected. This was mainly due to defects in the mailing list. Delays in completing the telephone interviews accounted for the major difficulty in conducting the evaluation. The interviewers encountered several obstacles in making initial contact with the respondents. In order to complete 205 questionnaires, approximately 440 numbers were called.

A major factor in the delay was the time spent getting the telephone numbers of the respondents in the sample. Because the interviewers were responsible for obtaining the numbers through directory assistance, valuable time was lost. Approximately 90 of the 440 numbers were not listed. In 10 cases, the numbers were unpublished; and in 41 cases, there was no answer. The mailing list might well be revised to include telephone numbers.

There were some difficulties in obtaining accurate information from the mailing list. The mailing list is theoretically updated every two months via a change in address card inserted in Liaison. The response rate is usually low, indicating that those not interested in receiving Liaison do not typically inform the Ministry of address changes or request cancellation.

In 80 cases, the respondents were not available for the interview. Several respondents were out of town or did not return a call after the first contact. Four individuals refused to be interviewed. Finally, twelve respondents were unfamiliar with the magazine and requested that they be taken off the mailing list.

The telephone data, which were obtained through random sampling of the mailing list, cannot be considered representative of the full readership. First, in many cases it was not possible to contact the person or organization on the mailing list. The contacting of a back-up remedied this to some extent. The large number of "no contacts" suggests that a percentage of readers did not keep Liaison informed of address changes. Second, a number of those contacted said they received Liaison but did not read it. These appear to have been librarians who circulated the publication to other readers not on the mailing list. There is no easy way to reach these readers, although the card survey may have tapped some of them.

The business reply cards provided additional data for the evaluation. The response rate was low; the 224 cards represent only a fraction of the approximately 9,000 cards which could have been returned. However, the returns do represent the views of those who wished to say something about Liaison.

One last issue involves the Comments and Suggestions section of the evaluation instruments. This section allowed for an elaboration of the interview questions. However, many of the respondents were not prepared to comment without taking more time to think about the magazine. In many cases, the magazine was not recently read and, therefore, not fresh in their minds. Advance notice of this telephone questionnaire may have eliminated this problem. The free response items constitute a very small portion of reader opinion, however, they do give some indication of the problem areas which could bear further examination. Over several years, readers of Liaison have sent in letters to the editor of Liaison commenting on different aspects of the publication. These letters were sampled and used in conjunction with the other data gathered.

Taken as a whole, the data should be generalized with caution; however, given the multiple methodology, the results should provide a good indication of reader's views and concerns regarding Liaison.